

Preserve the Ashes of Moria

Itamar Mann

2020-09-11T08:03:49

On Wednesday night, first images began to circulate online from the fires in Moria, the large and infamous refugee camp on Lesbos. Children and young adults displaced by war, once again displaced by flames, fleeing in medical facemasks. When Wednesday morning broke out, we learned that the camp was indeed burned to the ground, with around 13,000 refugees remaining shelterless in the surrounding area. In the afternoon, local authorities declared next steps.

As Dr. [Essam Daod](#) informed from a meeting on the island, plans are to close a vast area adjacent to the burnt camp and keep the camp's population inside. The area, natural and agricultural countryside planted with olives, will provide a new living space for the group. While groceries are available for purchase, it was not clear that any organized living spaces would be provided. Later in the evening, Giorgios Christides [reported](#) the Greek government said it will provide food, water, tents, and sanitation materials.

While limitations on movement for those who were in the camp are partially justified by Covid-19, the temporary plan is as dramatic as the fire. The local population on Lesbos has displayed some of the most momentous acts of generosity towards refugees during the 2015 "crisis". But they have long become impatient with the "hotspot", which many have said has turned the island into an open-air prison for migrants. Rendering that description rather literal, the plan is a recipe for intensified tensions. Commentators have rightly spoken about the way the camp normalized "deterrence" against migrants: pain and suffering inflicted upon them, supposedly to send a warning message to others. But we now see a further step. This is an plan that foreseeably fans the flames of racial animosity, actively creating conditions in which violence will intensify between migrant and local groups.

One of the photos that has since gone viral is Daphne Tolis's image of migrants resting among graves. Daod, a psychiatrist who has worked on the island on and off since 2015, [tweeted](#) it saying: "We seem to have reached a point when the dead are more merciful than the living." I received the photo also from Thanos Zartaloudis, authors of [The Birth of Nomos](#). Zartaloudis provided some longer commentary, worth reproducing here in full. He writes:

"Since political managers do not talk about causes and thus of effects, nor anymore acknowledge any old-fashioned responsibility, we no longer talk of war, violence, abuses, extortions, financial and political strategies of some nations and multi-national institutions leading to 'push outs' and 'push backs' of the denizens of the world... we can perhaps cynically only talk about death: the ground-zero of our depoliticization these days. Death whether of the dead or of the living dead (as is the case one hopes only temporarily with refugees in Greece and everywhere else) is not a cause or an effect in this 'logical' system of fate decommission. Death is just death.

So here in the burning of the “reception” centre of ‘living death’ at Moria, produced by the precise causes mentioned above and the complicity of all states and institutions involved, the ‘death march’ that led these refugees in their thousands to the streets, many of them children, ill, disabled, covid-positive, pregnant and so forth, led them also to a Greek orthodox cemetery where they found shelter. What happens when the political circus and the ethical cemetery are the only signposts of the, as we westerners like to say, ‘post-political’ social? The refugees here in their desperation point us, whether intentionally or not, to our common reality, the point of our tragic convergence. And this tragedy does not end well when the call of death is not heard by those in the back rows.”

What would it mean, practically, for “those in the back rows” to “hear the call of death”? This is a great mystery. It would probably mean abolishing Moria (no matter who lit the match that burned it). Five years after the hotspot approach introduced this style of European offshore bureaucracy, it is clearly a failure on all counts. Instead, as has been said countless times before, Europeans should find a way to “share the burden” of migration. (The term may sound problematic, but it appropriately recognizes that it is not an easy thing to integrate refugees into a new society).

It is clear however that Zartaloudis does not have high hopes for any such policy change. And such proposals inevitably ring hollow after they have been voiced countless times and thrown to the bin. What can we hope for instead?

Zartaloudis’s reference to a “death march” is of course loaded, referring to Nazi atrocities during World War II. This trope too has often been used in the context of a discourse on injustice against refugees and migrants, and in multiple parts of the world. As I have tried to argue [here](#), it is not simply a historical comparison. It is a way of trying to put into motion a change in fundamental political priorities. What would a world look like, in which current systematic human rights violations against migrants be conceived of as mass atrocities? We are still far from this world, but it might not be useless to look around us for its signs.

The population of Moria should be evacuated to safe places in Europe, for their own sake and for the sake of the people of Lesbos. But if that doesn’t happen, I hope the camp will remain as a the burnt skeleton that it is for as long as possible. Let this not be yet another opportunity for gigantic investments in new and more sophisticated incarceration systems for refugees and migrants, as many will surely push for.

Consider by comparison the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in Berlin. Located on the Kurfürstendamm, the church has famously left in ruins after its bombing during World War II. If Moria too is left destroyed, it will at least provide the semblance of such a memorial for catastrophe. Unlike with the church, this will not be due to a grand political choice and a historical victory. The powers that be both in Greece and in the EU are the ones responsible for the atrocity that Moria has been. The back rows in Brussels will not wake up and change their minds. Preserving the ashes of Moria, with all its historical and symbolic meaning, will depend rather on inaction and negligence. Such an act of negligence, however, will nevertheless serve as a

reminder, for those of us who look for it, of a torturous bureaucracy and a large revolt against it.

